



Torrige District Council
External Overview & Scrutiny

ANNUAL REPORT

2024-2025

Introduction by the Chair

It has been another busy year, with an array of different partners attending our External Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

This year was somewhat different to 2023-24 in that all of the attendees, (apart from the special meeting on Dentistry) were from organisations which are funded by the council in some way.

It was great to kick off the year with a joint meeting with North Devon Council and it is good to now see the North Devon MP Ian Roome taking up the case for dentistry in Parliament. A dentistry steering group has also been set up which is open to both North Devon and Torridge councillors to continue work on the dentistry crisis.

I would like to thank all of the attendees for their detailed presentations, and to the committee members for their questions which have helped to provide a very detailed insight into the organisations that we fund.

As always, many thanks to Karen Hewlett for her hard work in organising and recording the meetings, and also to Alison Stephenson the Local Democracy reporter for highlighting some of the work and outcomes in the local press.

I was particularly pleased this year with our “Arts Special” meeting which heard from members of the public, and three fantastic Arts organisations, with two of those being newly appointed Chief Executives (The Burton and The Plough). It was inspiring to hear their vision, of the huge artistic talent we hold here, the potential for the future and our creative identity which we need to be shouting about, particularly with devolution and local government reorganisation on the horizon.

I have enjoyed chairing the committee over the past couple of years, it has really helped to broaden my knowledge of the wider area of Torridge and the amazing organisations that are within it. Having been elected to Devon County Council I am very happy to be handing over as chair to Cllr Huw Thomas who I know will do a brilliant job, not just in getting an overview, but also scrutinising the work of our partners.

Over and out.

Councillor Cheryl Cottle Hunkin
Chair – External Overview & Scrutiny

The Role of External Overview & Scrutiny

The Council has 2 Overview & Scrutiny Committees, an **External** Overview & Scrutiny Committee and an **Internal** Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The Overview & Scrutiny Committees have the power to review the policies of the Council and its objectives and are entitled to 'call in' decisions made by the Community & Resources Committee which are not yet implemented. They can also recommend that the Community & Resources Committee reconsider such decisions. Issues that remain unresolved will be referred to the Full Council for determination.

The External Overview & Scrutiny Committee scrutinises the performance of selected external bodies and organisations serving the community within Torridge.

The External Overview & Scrutiny Committee is also the Council's Crime and Disorder Committee.

Committee Membership

Chair	Councillor Cottle-Hunkin
Vice Chair	Councillor A Brenton
Councillors	Louis Bach James Craigie Stephen Harding Trevor Johns Peter Shepherd Doug Smith Huw Thomas
Non-elected Representatives	2 Vacancies
Support Officers	S Dorey, Head of Legal & Governance K Brown, Corporate Support Officer (Democratic) L Glover, Corporate Support Officer (Democratic) K Hewlett, Corporate Support Officer (Elections and Democratic Services) S May, Corporate Support Officer (Democratic) T Vanstone, Senior Elections and Democratic Officer (Deputy Monitoring Officer)

Work carried out in 2024/25:

During May 2024 Torridge District Councillors were invited to attend and take part in a North Devon District Council Committee on Agriculture. Although this wasn't a scheduled TDC Committee, our Councillors were invited to attend. North Devon District Council voted to suspend standing orders so that Councillors who attended could ask questions of the panel and speak on the issues discussed.

Joint Committee with North Devon District Council on Dentistry Provision – 18 July 2024

The Committee was organised by North Devon District Council (NDDC) and was the second of 3 joint Committees with NDDC that took place during this committee cycle.

Members from Torridge District Council (TDC) External Overview & Scrutiny and NDDC Policy Development Committee heard from professionals working in Dentistry in the northern Devon area -

- Paul Waits – Specialist Orthodontist and Dentist
- Ian Mills – Partner at Torrington Dental Practice and Associate Professor in Primary Care Dentistry at Peninsula Dental School. Chair of Devon Oral and Dental Health.
- Chris Gooderham – Dentist with specialist interest in Orthodontics.

Members and the public in attendance were given the opportunity to ask questions of the panel. Discussion covered the commissioning and provision of services, NHS access, dental health inequalities and the role of education. There was further discussion around training, workforce challenges and promoting northern Devon as a place to work. The important role of data collection and monitoring, especially relating to vacancies and gaps in service provision locally, was noted throughout the meeting.

Outcome

Following the meeting Chairs for both Committees and officers met to agree the actions to be followed up. A press release was drafted by both Councils and released following the meeting.

Links were established with the North Devon Local Plan Working Group on health and wellbeing, so that feedback on dentistry provision and workforce could be a consideration.

The MP for North Devon has also since established a dentistry task group, which met for the first time in November 2024.

One Northern Devon – 04 September 2024

The meeting was inquorate, however the presenter from One Northern Devon shared presentation slides with those in attendance.

Outcome

Presentation slides were sent to members following the meeting.

Citizen's Advice and Torridge Voluntary Services (TTVS) – 16 October 2024

Citizen's Advice

The Committee heard from Vicki Rowe, Chief Executive Officer for Torridge, North, Mid and West Devon. A detailed presentation provided members with an overview of the work of the organisation, the support available in Torridge, some of the challenges of service delivery and a breakdown of funding.

Member discussion touched on a variety of issues, summarised below:

How the organisation was managing the demand for services and the backlog of work mentioned in the presentation. This developed into a discussion regarding the scope of the service and the geographical area covered. The impact of the changes to the Winter Fuel Allowance were noted, as were the increases in energy costs and running costs.

There was discussion regarding provision of support and the backlog. Members also shared their concern regarding the lack of face-to-face support – it was felt that, for some of the more vulnerable groups with complex issues, face to face support remained important for engagement.

There was a detailed discussion on access to provision in rural areas of Torridge. Members discussed the need for detailed mapping of provision in the local area and how this could be used to develop smarter ways to fund provision & demonstrate need for strategic work like that of the Local Plan.

The Head of Legal and Governance (& Monitoring Officer) advised of the decision-making process in terms of TDC budgets and the timescales.

TTVS

The Chief Executive for TTVS provided members with a detailed presentation, which highlighted their projects and the types of support they provide and explained how TDC funding was used and the outcomes achieved. Challenges for 2024-25 were detailed.

Members discussed transport assistance, which TTVS does not currently provide, the reasons behind this were explained, though there was recognition of the need.

The cost-benefit of the Financial Inclusion work was noted, and members reflected on the impressive statistics for this project - 100 referrals and £285,000 in benefits awarded from July to September.

Collaboration with North Devon Voluntary Services on the North Devon Inclusivity Framework was mentioned, aiming to make recreational activities more accessible.

Whilst discussing the Help at Home Service Members raised concerns about the service's continuation and funding, leading to a resolution to contact Devon County Council about this.

When the Chief Executive was asked about the needs of the local area she highlighted the benefits of a multi-agency Community Hub model, and advised that a feasibility study was underway. Examples of similar hubs were shared, emphasising the benefits of resource sharing and cohesive work.

The Chief Executive of Citizen's Advice supported the hub concept, noting confidentiality and consent considerations.

Members reflected on the importance of integrated work and funding support for complex needs.

Outcome

The Chief Executive for Citizen's Advice was asked to provide a breakdown of funding and what would be required to provide a face-to-face service in Holsworthy.

The Committee wrote to Devon County Council in relation to the Help at Home Service and concerns that were raised in terms of their funding allocations for the financial year.

Agreed action to discuss the community hub model at the Community Safety Partnership meeting.

Joint Community Safety Partnership – 13 November 2024

The special joint committee of Torridge District Council (TDC) and North Devon District Council (NDDC) received an update on the North Devon and Torridge Community Safety Partnership.

The Public Health & Community Safety Manager (TDC) presented an overview, introduced partners, and explained new chairing arrangements. Superintendent Toby Davies was thanked for his contributions as the former Chair.

The partnership's priority areas were confirmed as:

- Serious violence and violence against women and girls,
- Safer streets and anti-social behaviour,
- Emerging threats.

Achievements over the past year were highlighted for members and the partnership's work on anti-social behaviour was detailed, highlighting the number of engagements made by officers.

The officers from both Councils and the Police discussed the benefits of partnership work, particularly in funding applications and Chief Inspector Graham Thomas noted the positive impact on policing.

There was a detailed discussion where members from both Councils asked questions regarding the work of the partnership.

Discussion focused on the hubs set up in partnership with D&C Police, specifically within Bideford, Barnstaple, Ilfracombe and Westward Ho! Feedback was provided on locations and the planning of future engagement work, and officers provided further detail on the plans for the Jubilee Square hub and Street Marshalls. There was also an update provided on the work taking place in Ilfracombe in regard to ASB.

A possible extension of the night bus route was suggested by members, and it was felt that residents in towns like Torrington, Ilfracombe, and Westward Ho! would all benefit from the service.

Recent vandalism of play equipment in Victoria Park was highlighted and officers from Torridge District Council advised members of work taking place to upgrade CCTV.

Following discussion regarding firearms license it was agreed that D&C Police would look at how the concerns of health professionals were considered or reported as part of the licensing process.

There was also discussion on the work taking place to support the more rural areas of the northern Devon district and in terms of road safety.

Outcome

No recommendations were made at the meeting, however the feedback provided from members of both councils was taken away in terms of influencing future work and projects.

North Devon Biosphere – 08 January 2025

Andy Bell, UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve Co-ordinator, presented a detailed update on the North Devon Biosphere's current work, strategic priorities, and future direction. The presentation covered the Biosphere's geographical scope, governance, funding, and its contributions to the local community, environment, and economy.

The Biosphere's five key themes were explained as part of the presentation:

- Sustainable Economies
- Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation
- Improving Rivers and Seas
- Natural Capital Policy Innovation
- Connecting People and Biodiversity

The Reserve Coordinator explained how the Biosphere is working to reduce pollution and flood risks through natural flood management and data-driven monitoring. Following questions members were advised how water quality monitoring for the River Torridge would utilise existing treatment works, though it was recognised upgrades may be necessary due to local development.

Key projects on flood management, marine conservation and cultural engagement were all highlighted for members, along with examples of the partnership work taking place and the Biosphere's contribution to policy development.

Member discussion included the following issues which the Reserve Coordinator answered individually:

- Education: Shift from direct school engagement to teacher training; work to develop a pilot programme to reintroduce climate change education in schools was noted.
- Higher Education: Support for Petroc College's university status ambitions.
- Planning and Development: Active consultation on local development and planning applications.
- Regulation and Engagement: The Reserve Coordinator advised that whilst the Biosphere were not a regulator, they understood the importance of engagement work with South West Water to influence environmental practices.
- Woodland and Coastal Path Management: The emphasis on sustainable woodland management was explained as well as how the King Charles Coast Path plans may help with improvements to the coast path locally.
- Funding and Developer Contributions: accessing Section 106 funds and the role of Biodiversity Net Gain in terms of this.
- Tourism and Agriculture: Support for a potential tourist tax and early-stage regenerative farming projects, including a "Farm to Fork" shop concept.

In summing up the Reserve Coordinator advised of a 10-year review of the Biosphere is scheduled, with a consultation process planned for September 2025. It was confirmed that Torridge District Council would be a key consultee.

Outcome

No recommendations were made at the meeting, however members were advised of the scheduled consultation planned for September 2025. The detailed meeting had formed a very good overview which would help to inform a response.

The Arts in Torridge and Active Torridge – 12 February 2025

The Arts in Torridge

Claire Gulliver, TDC's Cultural Development Officer, outlined her role in supporting regeneration and delivering the Northern Devon Culture Strategy. Members heard from the Plough, the Burton Art Gallery and ArtMakers, as well as 2 public speakers on the item. Both public speakers highlighted their work and how living in the Torridge area had influenced their style.

The Plough

Emma Marston and Fran Hardiman presented the vision for The Plough Arts Centre, highlighting a focus on creativity, community, and fun through diverse programming such as theatre, music, comedy, and youth engagement.

They addressed key challenges including limited transport, rising energy costs, and funding pressures, and outlined strategies like a fundraising campaign – Buy a Brick, café income, and building renovations with solar panels.

The importance of volunteers and outreach work with schools and communities was emphasised, alongside efforts to attract younger audiences.

Members discussed school partnerships, building ownership, outreach in Holsworthy, and the café's role, with the Chief Executive confirming that many initiatives depend on availability of funding. The Plough celebrating its 50th anniversary was also highlighted for members.

The Burton

Harriet Cooper (Director) and Rob Millward (Chair of Trustees) presented an overview of The Burton's 2024 achievements, highlighting its exhibition program, youth and school engagement, environmental initiatives, and role as a tourist information hub.

They emphasised the gallery's economic and cultural impact, including support for local artists, a strong volunteer program, and outreach to rural and home-educated students. Plans for expansion, celebrating the 75th anniversary, and involvement in town regeneration were discussed.

Members reflected on and discussed the positive statistics on visitor numbers, the nationally acclaimed art exhibitions, museum accessibility, and publicity. There was further discussion about using public spaces for art and increasing marketing efforts and visibility with the town.

ArtMakers

Phil Parker, Director of ArtMakers—a volunteer-led, not-for-profit organisation supporting over 200 artists in North Devon—presented to members about the group's work since its founding in 2021. He highlighted their support for artists through physical and online galleries, workshops, outreach programs, and collaborations with local institutions like the Children's Hospice Southwest and Appledore Book Festival.

He introduced the concept of the New Atlantic Wave, a growing movement of around 300 visual artists in North Devon gaining national recognition, being the third largest in the UK after London and Cornwall. Parker emphasized the importance of securing funding for workshops and marketing, and the need to protect and widely promote the work of these artists.

Members discussed the broader value of the arts, particularly for mental health and community wellbeing, and the potential to brand North Devon and Torridge as a cultural centre. There was also a suggestion to link arts initiatives with heritage projects in Bideford.

The Director concluded with a call to develop a collective voice to elevate the region's creative identity, and the potential impact of devolution.

Active Torridge

The second part of the meeting was an opportunity for Members to hear from the Chief Operating Officer of Active Torridge, who presented the organisation's strategic goals and key performance indicators (KPIs) - including income and expenditure, admissions, customer satisfaction, community impact, and operational compliance. It was explained that the KPIs would be closely monitored, with customer satisfaction surveys managed in-house.

Members inquired about support for low-income individuals, and it was confirmed that concessions were built into membership pricing, including flexible, no-contract discounted memberships. A referral-based Exercise on Prescription scheme was in place, with plans to expand as new facilities open and staff receive further training. Further, it was confirmed that Active Torridge had also provided 100 free annual memberships through a successful funding bid and would be exploring future funding opportunities.

Concerns were raised about affordability and competition with other providers, to which it was noted that Torridge District Council's investment supports affordable access, including vital swimming facilities.

Members were advised that the KPI data would begin to be reported in line with the financial year. A 10% concession is currently offered, with any changes requiring Full Council approval.

Outcome

In relation to Arts in Torridge actions were agreed to follow up on transport links to and from Great Torrington to support The Plough, and to explore open art projects for the Torridge area: through ways such as opening up public exhibition space (eg empty shops) and the potential for murals in town centres.

In relation to Active Torridge, it was agreed that the KPIs would be reviewed in line with the financial year.

The Forward Plan

The Committee's Forward Plan aims to ensure topics are in line with TDC's strategic aims and we are pleased to report that the presentations above gave the Committee the opportunity to look in more depth at how the Council and its partners achieve stronger, safer, healthier communities; a prosperous and sustainable economy and an effective and customer focused offering.

Public Participation

Our Committee welcome Public Contribution when a resident can attend to raise issues and would always welcome more.

Members of the public attended and spoke at the joint Committee on Dentistry and the Committee focused on the Arts in Torrridge.

Summary of Outcomes 2024-25

Over the year a total of 13 organisations and groups and 2 public speakers attended the External Overview & Scrutiny Committee to share their work and raise issues with the Committee, with notable input from the public during dentistry and arts discussions. Below is a summary of the outcomes from all Committees.

Dentistry Provision (Joint Committee with North Devon)

Press release issued jointly by both councils.

Links established with North Devon Local Plan Working Group.

MP for North Devon formed a dentistry task group.

One Northern Devon

Presentation slides shared with members despite the meeting being inquorate.

Citizen's Advice & TTVS

A breakdown of funding was requested, as well as further detail on the requirements to provide face-to-face services in Holsworthy, and the requirement/aspiration of a community hub was noted

Committee wrote to Devon County Council regarding TTVS Help at Home Service funding.

Community Safety Partnership

Actions were agreed regarding CCTV and in terms of work on the community hubs.

North Devon Biosphere

No formal recommendations were made, but members were informed of a consultation in September 2025.

Arts in Torrridge

Actions were agreed to explore improved transport links to Great Torrington and for further consideration of open art projects and murals in the area.

Active Torrridge

KPIs to be reviewed in line with the financial year.